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ABSTRACT

This Topical Bibliography and Commentary reviews the recent research literature which focuses on writing--specifically, word choice in writing. The bibliography/commentary first lays a foundation that chronicles the importance of writing instruction in school. It then summarizes the importance of choosing quality words when writing, gives examples of how to teach word choice through writing, and explores the use of grammar to improve word choice through writing. The bibliography/commentary finds that through increased vocabulary awareness and by studying words in the context in which they are used, students can become better writers--when a student understands how the English language can be manipulated, many word choice opportunities are created. (Contains 5 Internet addresses and 12 references.) (NKA)

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Vocabulary: Word Choice in Writing

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Introduction

The following summaries focus on writing--specifically, word choice when writing. This paper will first lay a foundation that chronicles the importance of writing instruction in school. Then it will summarize the importance of choosing quality words when writing, give examples of how to teach word choice through writing, and explore the use of grammar to improve word choice through writing.

Importance of Writing

Language has always been a key issue in education. However, not all genres of language are taught equally. Until the last decade, "reading was emphasized; writing came later and received much less attention" (Sulzby, 1992, p. 290). The perception of writing has also changed. Writing was once thought of as creative writing only.

Today, writing has gained a lot of respect. Its importance is now recognized as early as kindergarten. "At kindergarten, most children are still using emergent forms of writing such as scribble, drawing, non-phonetic strings of letters, or phonetic spelling, and few have made the transition to conventional writing as their preferred writing form" (Sulzby, 1992, p. 290).

It has also been discovered that writing development is important for reading development because "writing development always includes reading development" (p. 291). Teachers are now taking more time to teach writing of all forms. Several strategies are being used to teach writing, including "whole language, language experience, emergent literacy, shared reading and writing, process writing, and 'kindergarten writing'" (p. 291).

Word Choice: Six-Trait Writing

Six-trait writing was developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory as a method of teaching and assessing student writing. Six-trait writing includes *ideas*, *organization*, *voice*, *word choice*, *sentence fluency*, and *conventions*.

Word choice is defined as the use of rich, colorful, precise language that moves and enlightens the reader. It is the love of language, a passion for words, combined with a skill in choosing words that creates just the right mood, impression, or image in the heart and mind of the reader.

When teaching word choice in six-trait writing, guidelines are given at three levels:

Advanced/5

Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting and natural way.

- Words are specific and accurate; it is easy to understand just what the writer means.
- The language is natural and never overdone; phrasing is highly individual.
- Lively verbs energize the writing. Precise nouns and modifiers create pictures in the reader's mind.
- Striking words and phrases often catch the reader's eye and linger in the reader's mind.
- Clichés and jargon are used sparingly, only for effect.

Acceptable/3

The language is functional, even if it lacks punch; it is easy to figure out the writer's meaning on a general level.

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- Words are almost always correct and adequate; they simply lack flair.
- Familiar words and phrases communicate, but rarely capture the reader's imagination. Still, the paper may have one or two fine moments.
- Attempts at colorful language come close to the mark but sometimes seem overdone.
- Energetic verbs or picturesque phrases liven things up now and then; the reader longs for more.

Unacceptable/ 1
The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words to convey meaning. The writing reflects more than one of these problems.

- Language is so vague (e.g., It was a fun time, She was neat, It was nice, We did lots of stuff) that only the most general message comes through.
- Persistent redundancy distracts the reader.
- Jargon or clichés serve as a crutch.
- Words are used incorrectly, sometimes making the message hard to decipher.
- Problems with language leave the reader wondering what the writer is trying to say (Six-Trait Writing Assessment Model).

Once teachers are trained on the six-trait writing process, they can use the assessment model as a framework in which to teach word choice. Once students understand what is expected, they can begin to focus their writing towards a level 5. In doing so, it is important to give students examples of quality versus poor writing. The following are examples of all three levels of writing:

Advanced/5
Seth came stumbling out of the forest to a clearing where the trees met the paved road. He was frozen with fear at the sight of the semi-truck stopped in the middle of it and Magi's crippled bike underneath. His brow was drenched in sweat and his clothes were soiled from the long run through the forest from the cabin. Catching his breath, he slowly walked around the front of the truck to see Magi lying in the middle of the road. He ran to her, asking her what to do. Magi's trembling voice spoke, "I wanted to show you everything."

Acceptable/3
Glacius awoke from the raggedy blanket he always kept with him. The cold chill of the early morning blew across the high mountain top. He was not cold however, it was far too refreshing and enchanting to be uncomfortable. As the young man overlooked the large valley he saw the lush and great forest that spread across the whole area so thick it was like a large green carpet. You could make out a few large cities which almost poked through the tall canopy.

Unacceptable/1
I watch the opponent sitting in the corner all six foot one inch, two-hundred pounds glaring at me. As the tenth round bell rings, I go out to fight the opponent. I take three steps towards the defender only to get a right smashed against my face. The impact is like a baseball bat connecting to a baseball as I stumble back into the ropes, spit flies out of my mouth, like a flock of geese fleeing the water as a shotgun blast enters towards them. Blood pouring down my face like a crimson river over a waterfall.

Six-trait writing is a good measure of teaching and assessing word choice in writing, because it can be used at all grade levels. Teachers can adapt the examples to fit the level of their students.

Teaching Word Choice

Current literature continues to emphasize how important it is for teachers to expose their students to an extensive vocabulary and foster their use of richly textured words by using a range of activities and strategies (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Carnicelli, 2001; Rosenbaum, 2001; Yaworski & Ibrahim, 2001). Teaching word choice at an early age is important because "good authors use interesting words in their writing. Their language is lively, specific, and beautiful to the ear" (Sloan, 1996, p. 1). There are many ways to teach good word choice when teaching writing. Sloan (1996) illustrates several examples. One method is to create an interesting word wall. Whenever the class encounters an interesting word through reading, students find the meaning of the word and post it on the wall. They can also use the interesting word list when writing their own papers.

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Mini-lessons provide an ideal way to strengthen a student's word choice. Sloan offers a variety of mini-lessons for word choice:

> **Interesting word search:** Pairs of students look through a book, recording the interesting words they find. Next to the interesting word, students write the common word the author could have used.
> **Act out words:** To illustrate the power of words, students dramatize several words that differ by shades of meaning. The class guesses which word is being portrayed. We put these "word cousins" on a chart for students to use.
> **Energetic verbs:** I read Mem Fox's (1998) *Night Noises* to show a good author's use of lively language. We record the energetic verbs Fox uses to help her story come alive. I encourage students to write like Fox.
> **Alphabet books:** Some alphabet books are sources for interesting words. After reading several ABC books, students pick a theme such as "Animals and Movement" and write their own alphabet books.
> **Nice-o-nyms:** Students brainstorm a list of synonyms for the word. We post the list in the classroom. We do the same with *sad*, *happy*, *big*, and other overused words.
> **Poetry:** We talk about the words poets use. Students paint with watercolors while I read the lyrics of Elizabeth Coatsworth, create with clay when I recite Jack Prelutsky's "The Dragons Are Singing Tonight" (1993), and draw cartoons to illustrate Karla Kuskin's "A Bug Sat in a Silver Flower" (1980). I continue to encourage students to give the interesting words life as they recite poems individually and orally (Sloan, 1996, p. 1).

Sentence structure is a second key element when teaching word choice. Short, concise sentences usually do not contain good words. Through teaching students to expand their sentences, better word choice will follow. Cudd & Roberts illustrate a system of teaching expanded sentences in the December 1993/January 1994 issue of *Teaching Reading*.

Cudd & Roberts begin by selecting vocabulary from various materials, regardless of difficulty. Then they select a syntactic structure to introduce and "embed the targeted vocabulary into sentence stems that, when expanded, will produce complex sentences" (1994, p. 347). These stems are written on the board for the students to complete. One example of a stem is, "While on our daily journey to the cafeteria, _____." The targeted vocabulary might be *journey*. Students complete the sentences together and practice reciting them out loud. "Children form a sense of how to use the sentence structure and vocabulary after hearing it repeated in peer-generated sentences" (1994, p. 347).

Cudd & Roberts have found success using sentence expansion as a technique for teaching word choice. They state, "We have observed an increased awareness of the importance of specific word choice and detail in our student's writing" (1994, p. 348).

Improving Word Choice Through Grammar

Students can further increase their vocabulary through studying grammar. When identifying parts of speech, "words can be brainstormed to replace any single word within the sentence" (Ediger, 1998, p. 7). Students can also expand sentences to increase their vocabulary and increase their grammar awareness. One idea is to add modifiers to sentences. "Modifiers can be single word adjectives and adverbs as well as adjective and adverbial phrases" (1998, p. 7). Ediger uses the example, "The spotted cat with a collar ran down the stairs." Students can do many things with this sentence "such as use of collars and selected clothing" (1998, p. 7). The sentence could be changed to read, *The spotted cat with the spiked collar and torn sweater ran down the stairs.*

Another method to increase word awareness is to teach appositives and subordination. Appositives "add necessary meaning to a sentence" (1998, p. 8). Ediger uses the example, "Bill, the catcher, hit a home run." Without the appositive (the catcher), the sentence could become confusing if there were more than one "Bill" on the team. The appositive identifies the subject. Subordination can be used to create better sentences when writing. "I walked the dog" and "I gave the dog a treat" are short, choppy sentences. Combining them to read, "I walked the dog and gave him a bath" is more appealing to the reader. As students become better at understanding the English language, they will become better writers by learning how to manipulate words.

Conclusion

The study of language arts has many facets, including reading, writing, and grammar. All of these combine when a student is learning. Through increased vocabulary awareness and by studying words in the context in which they are used (Beck et al.2002; Hennings, 2000; Michael, 2001) students can become better writers. When a student understands how the English language can be manipulated, many word choice opportunities are created. It is also important for a student to understand what is expected of them. When given examples as in the six-trait writing model, they are able to revise their own writing to meet the higher standards placed upon them.

Internet Resources

*Lesson guides for helping students consider word choice in their writing that use the 6 Traits Writing framework
http://6traits.cyberspaces.net/mini-wc.html
http://www.ttms.org/writing_quality/word_choice.htm
http://www.flowingwells.k12.az.us/Staff%20Development/six%20traits/lessons/hswc/hswc.htm

*Vocabulary's Influence on Successful Writing (ERIC Digest)
http://eric.indiana.edu/ieo/digests/d157.html

*Strategies for Writing Improvement (ERIC Bibliography)
http://eric.indiana.edu/ieo/bibs/writimprove.html

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